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Gorbachev's Nuclear Learning

How the Soviet leader became a nuclear abolitionist.

Vladislav M. Zubok

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In a 1995 political profile of Mikhail Gorbachev, the late Dmitry Volkogonov said: "One of the historical, giant achievements of *perestroika* was, naturally, the removal in effect of the threat of world nuclear war. This achievement has not yet been fully appreciated."¹ Four years later, former Foreign Minister of the Soviet Union Eduard Shevardnadze told me in an interview: "I recall [when, in the 1980s] the leading scholars and scientists believed that if humanity does not resolve its problems, there could be nuclear disaster. We understood that nuclear disarmament was mandatory, and that we could put an end to the danger only through political methods."

For Gorbachev and the new cohort of Soviet leaders that came to power with him in 1985, the threat of nuclear disaster was indeed an important stimulus for disarmament. Moreover, the worldwide antinuclear movement influenced the Gorbachev leadership, as it influenced the Reagan administration (see Lawrence Wittner's contribution to the forum). But the motives for nuclear disarmament were by no means confined to such external factors. Equally, if not more, important in explaining the extraordinary developments at the end of the Cold War was the reformist agenda, "new thinking," and personality of Mikhail Gorbachev.

Nuclear Neophyte

Josef Stalin, Nikita Khrushchev, and Leonid Brezhnev were each obsessed with strategic nuclear armaments. They were generous patrons of the military-industrial complex, and understood the nuts-and-bolts of the Soviet military power. In contrast, Gorbachev came into contact with nuclear issues late in his life, after he became a

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full Politburo member and only five years before he became the General Secretary of the CPSU in March 1985. As a party secretary from an agricultural region, Gorbachev had no occasion to deal with those issues. After Yuri Andropov became the General Secretary in November 1982, he added Gorbachev to the inner circle of the Politburo, which discussed the matters of special state importance. Still, the nuts-and-bolts of nuclear issues remained the exclusive purview of the General Secretary and of Minister of Defense Dmitry Ustinov, a powerful master of the Soviet military-industrial complex. But Ustinov died in December 1984. Four months later Gorbachev became General Secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU and inherited all the responsibilities of the supreme commander and the possessor of "nuclear button."

In an interview with Russian scientist Yuri Smirnov in August 1994 Gorbachev said that when he received "the button," he did not experience any drama: "Perhaps there was emotional side to it.... But it was rectified by my knowledge of the might that had been accumulated. One-thousandth of this might was enough to destroy all living things on earth. And I knew the report on 'nuclear winter.'" But he did eventually experience something like a moral revulsion when he realized his personal responsibility for the accumulation and possible use of nuclear weapons. "I recall my new colleagues--reformers in the Politburo, whom I commissioned as the General Secretary [to deal with nuclear issues] and who began to receive those documents--coming and sharing their impressions with me," he said. "They seemed to have known everything--figures that were bandied about, the conclusions of the scientists. But when you personally have to sign this kind of documents, this is quite a different matter. And some of them came to me in a state of shock."

Perhaps as a result of this inner moral repugnance, Gorbachev felt no motivation to learn more than he "needed" about the Soviet nuclear arsenal, the strategic arms race, and issues of strategic stability. One minister recalls a meeting with Gorbachev in 1987 to discuss the Soviet response to Ronald Reagan's "Strategic Defense Initiative" (SDI). He maintains that Gorbachev was not interested in nuts and bolts of missile technology. At some point, Gorbachev asked if Reagan had a point in asking if strategic missiles could really be turned back after launch. In another, even more spectacular episode, Gorbachev participated in a simulation of a Soviet response to a nuclear attack. He explained: "From the central control panel came the signal: missiles are flying towards our country, make a decision. Minute after minute passes, information pours in. I have to give the command for a strike of retaliation.... I said: 'I will not press the button even for training purposes.'" ²

Different methods can be used to minimize "discomfort" about nuclear weapons and remove doubts about their usability. In the United States.

me: "nat. choice"
 when wanted

[vN:]

"Go"! look at my

Order Analysis!

the "nuclear culture" developed by a group of "nuclear priests"--the wizards of Armageddon--played a large role. They managed to create an aura of rationality around nuclear weapons and achieved a compromise with morality by arguing that nuclear weapons were the best guardian of peace. Some elements of this "nuclear ideology" were shared by the Soviet leadership and the military elite. But it was not deeply rooted in the Soviet political and military establishment, most of whose members had never fully grasped the intricacies of nuclear deterrence. The real backbone of Soviet leaders' attitude to nuclear issues was their experience of the early phases of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. This experience fed their determination never again to be caught unprepared or with an inferior military arsenal. They saw the Soviet nuclear program as the heroic achievement of Soviet science, industries, and people, and held the firm conviction that nuclear parity with the United States should be maintained at any cost. Moreover, any notion of "immoral equivalence" between Soviet and American nuclear arsenals was angrily repudiated and cognitively suppressed. Beginning in the early 1980s, the pre-Gorbachev leadership repeatedly proclaimed that victory in nuclear war was impossible. But it continued to build Soviet strategic nuclear forces with an implicit aim of matching and, if possible, surpassing the United States arsenal.

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TO BE SURE, the leadership also realized the dangers and costs of the cycle of nuclear build-up. This realization motivated Brezhnev to conduct arms control talks with Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and Jimmy Carter in the 1970s. After Brezhnev's death there remained a powerful group of proponents of arms control and reductions in Soviet political leadership and bureaucracies; this group included Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, his first deputy Georgy M. Kornienko, head of the General Staff Sergei F. Akhromeyev, and a group of professional arms control negotiators (*peregovorshchiki*). The dominant force behind this group was the General Staff and those diplomats (Gromyko, Akhromeyev, Kornienko) who shared concerns of the military establishment.

In general, by the time Gorbachev came to power, there was no opposition in the Politburo to arms talks; on the contrary, the Politburo wanted to resume arms talks with the United States. In particular, Politburo members were concerned with two issues: the SDI and the United States deployment of Pershing missiles in Western Europe. These concerns led to two competing positions on the future of Soviet-American talks. One line was to focus on strategic missiles and medium-range missiles in Europe as the most probable areas of agreement. Others focused on the SDI and the danger that an "arms race in space" presented to the whole regime of strategic parity. The proponents of the second position were the General Staff and its allies

proponents of the second position were the General Staff and its allies in the foreign ministry, including Gromyko.

Gorbachev, at first, did not take a stand on these issues. But the new General Secretary had a different political agenda and this shaped his attitudes to the problem of nuclear weapons and security. He and his entourage wanted to reform the Soviet Union, to lead the country out of the dangerous deadlock of "stagnation." In the opinion of the reformers around Gorbachev, the heavy emphasis by the Brezhnev leadership on achieving strategic parity with the United States had prevented projects of domestic restructuring and blocked all attempts to promote non-military branches of the economy and raise standards of living. Gorbachev wanted to return to these projects and bring them to fruition. And advancing those domestic concerns meant stopping the arms race.

Not that SU was
"bankrupt" — but
it could not be
reformed, or raised
SoL with peace on. ✓

Among his supporters in this regard were Shevardnadze, Aleksandr Yakovlev (who became a Central Committee secretary for ideological matters and a Politburo member in February 1986), and Anatoly Chernyaev (who became a personal foreign policy assistant of the General Secretary, also in February 1986). Later they took a strong stand in favor of liberalization and reconciliation with the West. But even the members of Gorbachev's Politburo who would later represent a more conservative line on domestic reforms and ideology-- Gromyko, Yegor Ligachev, Nikolai Ryzhkov, Vladimir Dolgikh, Vitaly Vorotnikov--wholeheartedly supported the steps towards nuclear disarmament. Akhromeyev, Kornienko, and other arms control professionals also, in their own way, supported the idea of disarmament--after all, they thought, the United States, not the Soviet Union, needed nuclear weapons to ensure its security goals around the world. Chernyaev recalls a common belief that "one can remove a war threat by focusing only on the issue of disarmament."³

us. FS, CF

yes

The shift from military preparedness to domestic reforms and disarmament, from orthodoxy to new thinking, first appeared in the foreign policy segment of Gorbachev's speech at the Party Congress in February 1986, which contained the key principle of interdependence in the nuclear age. But it was more fully revealed in a "secret" speech to the senior personnel of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in late May 1986. There he said: "Peace is the value above anything. In the nuclear-cum-space era a world war is the absolute evil. It cannot be won, as well as the arms race.... The threat of nuclear war cannot be ignored when one discusses the prospects of world class struggle."⁴ Significantly, Gorbachev no longer considered nuclear-strategic parity as the crucial *and sufficient* guarantee of peace. And he understood that a constant struggle for parity was incompatible with serious reform.

This shift, however, took time. International tension, the hostile rhetoric and military buildup by the Reagan administration, and a

economic and military buildup by the Reagan administration, and a scarcity of contacts between West and East in 1985-86 did not provide a favorable environment for a shift from the "hard-line" to a more conciliatory, non-militarist mentality. Until the end of 1985 Gorbachev was pre-occupied with simply reviving United States-Soviet arms talks. At the Soviet-American summit in Geneva in November 1985 the mutual mistrust between Gorbachev and Reagan mandated a minimalist agenda. Reagan's advisor on negotiation strategy with the Soviets was surprised when Gorbachev signed with Reagan a statement that "a nuclear war could not be won and must never be fought." He interpreted it as "a major reversal of Soviet policy." The irony was that the principled agreement about it had become an undisputed consensus in the Politburo since the détente of the 1970s. Soviet guidelines for the Geneva summit also mentioned it as "the maximum what one could get" from the Reagan leadership.

Only after Geneva did the General Secretary feel free to begin formulating a new vision of security that corresponded with his reformist preferences. Nuclear disarmament became its cornerstone.

First Steps

After Geneva, a strong political momentum emerged for new initiatives, since Gorbachev was to deliver a policy address to the 26th Party Congress in February 1986. On New Year's Eve, he met in Moscow with all Soviet arms negotiators. He asked for fresh ideas and approaches, and they, frustrated with years of fruitless talks with the West, eagerly shared them with him. Then he demanded that they should repeat them in front of the entire Politburo. At the same time Kornienko and Akhromeyev plotted, apart from the rest of the arms control community, to present Gorbachev with an attractive "comprehensive" plan of complete nuclear disarmament by 2000. In the end, they carried the day and persuaded Gorbachev (who then left for vacation in Pitsunda on the Black Sea) to approve of their idea. Returning from vacation, he announced the plan to the world and inserted it into the foreign policy section of his political report to the 27th Congress of the CPSU. The Soviet leader began to speak about the need for "new thinking" and, as seen in retrospect, made the total abolition of nuclear weapons a pillar of this thinking.

Despite these large ambitions, Gorbachev and his immediate entourage lacked any alternative broad picture of Soviet security. In particular, he could not ignore the the SDI challenge. In November 1985, at the Geneva summit, Gorbachev still could not tell what was on Reagan's mind when he spoke of the the SDI: Was it a fantasy, a means of pressing the USSR into diplomatic concessions? Or was it "an awkward attempt to lull us into complacency, while bringing to fruition the crazy idea" of a first strike?⁵ A witness recalls Gorbachev was "almost embarrassed" by the failure of his irresistible charm on Reagan, and was bothered by a huge chasm between United States and Soviet positions, perceptions, and logic. He said in a narrow circle

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(Farely); CPD!
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Soviet positions, perceptions, and logic. He said in a narrow circle: "What is this President doing? He would be a good dacha neighbor, but as a political partner he leaves a dismal impression."⁶

The perception of the SDI as a threat to Soviet security continued to haunt Gorbachev throughout 1986. The recommendations of the commission of scientists under Evgeny P. Velikhov to study feasibility of "a Soviet SDI" are still unavailable, but there is no evidence to conclude, as some hard-line US experts have, that Reagan's "vision" left the Soviets desperate and in panic, since they could not emulate it. Rather, according to Kornienko and Chernyaev, there are indirect indications that the Velikhov commission waffled. Some Soviet arms designers considered the SDI to be a bluff, but at the same time asked for money to develop new military technologies. Beginning in 1983, Andropov and Ustinov had authorized research on "asymmetrical response" to the SDI. At first, Soviet designers and scientists produced two hundred "options," then reduced them to thirty. Those possibilities, they calculated, would cost the Soviet economy only 10 percent of the projected cost of American program.

No wonder that Gorbachev, lacking professional understanding of the issue, could not bring himself to dismiss SDI as a long-term threat. At the same time, unlike the previous leadership, he also regarded SDI as an additional rationale for the nuclear disarmament. In March 1986, Gorbachev suggested at the Politburo: "Maybe we should just stop being afraid of the SDI! Of course, we cannot be indifferent to this dangerous program. But [the people of the US military-industrial complex] are betting precisely on the fact that the USSR is afraid of the SDI--in the moral, economic, political, and military sense. That is why they are putting pressure on us--to exhaust us. And we decided to say: yes, we are against the SDI, because we are in favor of abolishing nuclear weapons. But for us this is a problem not of fear, but of responsibility, because the consequences would be unpredictable."⁷

While the SDI kept Gorbachev on the fence between nuclear orthodoxy and his abolitionist instincts, the Chernobyl nuclear reactor explosion in April 1986 forced his hand. The accident, its global discussion, and disastrous fallout across huge Soviet areas shattered the Soviet militarized mentality to the core. The scale of post-catastrophe mobilization of troops and economic resources and the resettlement of population reminded many of the high-placed government and military officials of the Great Patriotic War. Yet, as Robert English correctly points out, "Chernobyl's message was the opposite" of the message of the war. While the latter had been used by the Soviet regime for decades to tout military buildup and preparedness, the lessons of Chernobyl called for abrogation of secrecy and xenophobia, for fundamental rethinking of security in the nuclear age. In political terms, Gorbachev used Chernobyl to undercut the very basis of the nuclear orthodoxy: the heroic and romantic image

like US
h8!
so, only way?

might ask

of Soviet nuclear power.

The catastrophe for the first time induced the Soviet leadership to look at the task of nuclear disarmament as a moral imperative independent of political calculations. In Shevardnadze's later words, the tragedy "tore the blindfold from our eyes" and "convinced us that morality and politics could not diverge." For the first time, the Soviet leadership allowed the media to pursue serious public debates about nuclear dangers. The result was a surge of antinuclear sentiments in the Soviet Union. Gorbachev also immediately sensed that Chernobyl would increase antinuclear momentum in the West. He tested his new argument on Richard Nixon when the former president visited Moscow: "Even if one country would constantly be arming itself, and the other would do nothing, then this first country still would gain nothing. For the weak side may simply detonate all its nuclear devices, even on its own territory, and it would mean suicide for it and a slow killing for the adversary."⁸ This was a type of argument that Gorbachev would soon codify in his "new thinking."

NUC WATER

(if it destroyed
its own cities!)

(D.M.)

SO awareness that
it had a D.M. (not
as civil US) ^{autonomous}

Moscow

Soviet Option

for US, SO

F, E, Pak, (India)

Israel,

South Africa

(Sov NWS but

NK has a D.M.)

Reykjavik

April '86

Immediately after Chernobyl, Gorbachev decided to achieve a breakthrough in strategic arms control. At first, this determination led to the successful completion of the Stockholm talks on verification and trust. The Soviets accepted, for the first time in arms control history, on-site inspections for conventional weapons; this later proved to be essential for the implementation of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty.

The Pershings in Western Europe, with their extremely short flight-time, remained the most destabilizing and threatening weapon for the Kremlin. In the summer of 1986, a group of leading Soviet military experts presented a report on the danger of US intermediate nuclear forces in Europe. The idea was to talk to the United States about full liquidation of both the Pershings and the SS-20s, and the proponents asked for political support against the Soviet military establishment that objected to it. Gorbachev said he would support it. In the opinion of one observer, "this was the threshold, from where the practical work on reduction of nuclear armaments began."⁹

zero
option

Once again, Gorbachev needed a more comprehensive program than the limited negotiations on the INF. In August, he came up with an idea of an emergency arms control summit with Reagan at Reykjavik, Iceland. The preparations for Reykjavik were marked by several new steps toward a new Soviet disarmament policy—one that would abandon the goal of strict parity between the Soviet Union and all of its strategic opponents. In preparation for the summit, Gorbachev announced, without consulting the military, that he would exclude British and French nuclear forces from the equation at the talks with Americans. Moreover, picking several points out of the January 1986

plan for disarmament, he authorized 50 percent cuts on Soviet intercontinental ballistic missiles, including the "heaviest" ones, which had caused considerable concern in the United States since the 1970s. If implemented, this package would have produced disproportionately larger cuts on the Soviet side, in what was the most treasured part of Soviet strategic arsenal.

In preparations for Reykjavik, Gorbachev persuaded the civilian and military leadership to present not just a proposal on INF elimination, but "the package" that would include strategic weapons and the SDI. He justified this approach as a bold step to "to prevent the next round of the arms race." And he argued that the USSR could not afford a traditional tit-for-tat response to Reagan's challenge: "[We] will be pulled into an arms race that is beyond our capabilities, and we will lose it, because we are at the limit of our capabilities. Moreover, we can expect that Japan and [West Germany] could very soon join the American potential.... If the new round begins, the pressure on our economy will be unbelievable."¹⁰ British scholar Archie Brown noticed that, at this moment, the SDI was not so much a security concern for Gorbachev as "a further argument for the kind of policy innovation which would break the deadlock and end the vicious spiral of arms race."

even
argued
response?

THE PREPARATIONS FOR Reykjavik may be considered a turning point in Gorbachev's shift to new thinking not only on the issue of nuclear disarmament, but also in his overall political agenda, including issues of security and domestic reform. For the first time that September, he blamed the lack of economic progress and the continuing social stagnation on "the headquarters" of local Soviet and party organizations. In a fateful move for his political career and the future of the Soviet Union, Gorbachev decided to liberalize the Soviet political system, to open the gates for "glasnost," and, above all, to create a new base of support for his perestroika in Soviet society--an alternative to the Communist Party. Simultaneously, he began to regard nuclear disarmament not only as a desirable long-term goal, but also as a tool to achieve a spectacular "breakthrough" in Soviet-American relations and to end the Cold War with the West.

1986 - not 1989!

The summit began with a conversation between the two leaders without ministers and advisers. Even before the formal talks began, Gorbachev assured Reagan that he would support the "ultimate liquidation of nuclear weapons" on the principle of "equal security." He also said he would go "as far on the matter of verification as would be necessary" to remove American doubts.¹¹ For the first time, the remarkable antinuclear synergy between Gorbachev and Reagan revealed itself. In the next two days Reagan and Gorbachev quickly agreed on more points of disarmament than all their predecessors

combined. According to American experts, Gorbachev made more concessions than they had received from the Soviet Union in 25 years. For his part, Reagan, without bothering to consult with his secretary of state, the Pentagon, or allies, suggested a complete elimination of nuclear weapons by 1996. Gorbachev agreed, but demanded only one concession: renunciation of any plans to test components of missile defense in space. Reagan refused and the summit collapsed.

Wg?

This episode revealed with utmost clarity that Gorbachev's "learning" had strict limits. Clearly, had he proposed just talks on INF to Reagan, the summit would have ended positively. His "package" approach guaranteed the deadlock. In an unconscious mirror-image projection of his own situation, he complained in Moscow that the US President had no capacity "to break free from the dependence on the military-industrial complex." At a Politburo he complained that Reagan "is unable to handle his gang" and "appears to be a liar."¹² ?

?
might for
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this?)

But the drama of Reykjavik constituted what, in retrospect, Gorbachev defined as a "breakthrough." Those days of October 1986 produced on him a psychological effect that was "comparable to Chernobyl": it shook the foundations "of the post-war world." "After Reykjavik," said Gorbachev to his Politburo colleagues, "we rose to the new level of understanding of the disarmament issues. Those options that were advanced in the past are now buried. We have a new platform ... a qualitatively new situation. The discussion on nuclear disarmament has advanced to the new, higher level, from which we must expand further the struggle for liquidation and full ban on nuclear weapons, to continue actively our peace offensive."

both really
wanted this!

The Sources of New Thinking

At that crucial time, two groups, in addition to the reform-minded entourage, assisted Gorbachev in his breakthrough to radical disarmament approaches. One was the nuclear "freeze" movement among scientists in the West, which found echo among Soviet intellectuals. The themes of this movement resonated in Moscow long before Gorbachev came to power. In 1982-83 some high-placed political analysts in Moscow began to write about "new thinking" in "the nuclear age," implicitly attacking both "realist" and "class-based" rationales for nuclear arms race. The key idea of global interdependence and of the indivisibility of security in the nuclear age also began to circulate at that time, and Georgi Shakhnazarov, senior official of the Central Committee's international department, dared to defend it in print. The Soviet leadership established "The Committee for Peace, Against Nuclear Threat," headed by Roald Sagdeyev, to expand controlled contacts with Western "nuclear freeze" activists. Along all these channels, the ideas of Western nuclear abolitionists ? reached the Soviet leadership. Gorbachev in 1985 appealed publicly to The Union of Concerned Scientists with proposals to stop the arms race. And, after Geneva, Gorbachev included academics Evgeny

foreachi

Velikhov, Sagdeyev, and Georgi Arbatov in his inner group of his advisers.

In the propaganda campaign for extending the moratorium on nuclear testing, Gorbachev and his advisers used channels of "public diplomacy" in order to garner support of the Western "freeze" audience. While there was probably a manipulative side to those contacts, Gorbachev and his scientist advisers were also imbued with a genuine concern to find kindred souls. American historian Matthew Evangelista concludes that "the transitional disarmament movement deserves credit not only for the initial idea of the Soviet moratorium but especially for its continuation [from July 1985 until February 1987] in the fact of the US refusal to join." After Reykjavik, Gorbachev approved preparations for the Moscow International Forum for a Nuclear Weapon-Free World. And when this forum opened in February 1987, he appealed to "the giant social movement" against nuclear weapons for support for both Soviet reforms and disarmament. This was the first time that Gorbachev implied that both tasks had the common foundation in the new thinking, the principles of interdependence and mutual trust.

The second group that helped shape Gorbachev's antinuclear convictions consisted of foreign, mostly Western, statesmen, including British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, French President Francois Mitterand, US Secretary of State George Schultz, and, of course, Ronald Reagan. These meetings helped Gorbachev to discard his Cold War fears of the West--and of the American political system--and to realize, gradually and with setbacks, that one could do business with Reagan and that the US President, unlike his entourage, might actually be a nuclear abolitionist.

At a meeting between Gorbachev and Mitterand in July 1986, Gorbachev attacked Reagan and "the forces and groupings that brought him to power" for promoting the SDI and failing to understand new security needs of humanity. In response, Mitterand admitted that "the military-industrial complex might be applying strong pressure on the US administration." At the same time, he added, "one should keep in mind that [although] Reagan is conditioned by his own milieu, he is not without common sense and intuition." He appealed to Gorbachev not to assess the political setup in the United States "as something set in stone. The situation may change." He also catered to Gorbachev's genuine security concerns, posing as a middleman between the Soviet Union and Americans. The exchange between Mitterand and Gorbachev proceeded as follows:

Mitterand: I told [Reagan]: Are you interested that the Soviet Union had a chance to transfer more resources to the goals of economic development at the cost of reduction of military expenditures in its budget? Or, on

the contrary, the United States seeks to exhaust the Soviet Union through arms race, to uproot the USSR, to force the Soviet leadership to invest more and more means to the non-productive expenditures, to armaments? I told Reagan frankly ... that the first choice would mean war, and the second--peace.

Gorbachev: This is very important information.... Our views on this are quite close."

US?

Mitterand: Really, non-productive expenditures know no limit but war. People will not tolerate for long the transfer of the already limited resources to the production of something that cannot be used for feeding, clothing, education, lodging. In essence, the majority of American politicians stand for negotiations. The risk of war is too obvious for them.

Gorbachev: I note this consideration as yet another important moment in our conversation.¹³

And in his conversation with Nixon, who had a good standing among Soviet leaders as the architect of "détente" in the 1970s, Gorbachev was told that:

RN?

You are right that there are people in the [Reagan] administration that do not want agreements with the Soviet Union. It seems to them that if they can isolate the Soviet Union diplomatically, apply economic pressure on it, achieve military superiority, then the Soviet order would collapse. Of course, this is not going to happen. During many years Reagan, as you know, was considered a part of the grouping that shared these views. However, today he is not one of them. I learned from conversations with him that the meeting with you had a slow, but undeniable impact on the evolution of his thoughts.¹⁴

Margaret Thatcher also became an important sparring partner of Gorbachev; she defended nuclear orthodoxy and he attacked it with full force. Thatcher fully grasped the double-sided idea of reform and disarmament promoted by Gorbachev, but categorically rejected the idea of a nuclear-free world as a dangerous romantic utopia. In retrospect, as one observer of the meetings has said, Thatcher was right, for the process of disarmament followed closer to her vision. But, as Chernyaev points out, "had Gorbachev been not so pushy, so implacable in his desire to prove to all that nuclear weapons are an absolute evil and one cannot not build world politics on it, then the process would never have begun at all, and we even today would not have had that really historic turn in the arms race that, after all, had taken place."¹⁵

taken place. 12

SDI?

?

Oct 1986

There were no serious domestic counter-forces. The Politburo fully supported Gorbachev's disarmament course and activism. The discussion of the results of the Reykjavik summit at the Politburo in October 1986 reveals that Gorbachev skillfully used the broad political consensus among his colleagues on the need to remove the threat of nuclear war and to transfer resources from arms race to reconstruction of Soviet economy. He stressed the huge propagandistic victory and the impact of his post-summit press-conference on world public opinion, particularly on antinuclear peace movements. At the same time he prudently assured the military that "one must not let pacifist sentiments penetrate the armed forces and the military industries. It is important to do everything to ensure the inevitability of our retaliatory strike. In this regard, we should not touch our allocations for defense. We also should pay special attention to the issues regarding our possible response to the SDI." 16

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Advocates of separate talks on the elimination of the INF hailed Gorbachev's performance and admitted that his "package approach" was the correct one. Gromyko and KGB chairman Viktor Chebrykov also praised a great political propagandist victory. With such support from the so-called "hard-liners" and in the aura of international and domestic fame of a "peace-maker and disarmer," Gorbachev had a huge political capital, in addition to the power of the post, to be able to lead the reluctant and torn Reagan administration further down the road of practical disarmament measures.

The INF Talks

During the Cold War, an asymmetrical approach to disarmament was blocked not so much by domestic politics as by old security concepts. As the leader with absolute political power, Gorbachev could squash the opposition, but could not ignore security fears, particularly as he authorized glasnost and public debates on security issues. From the very beginning, progress on disarmament required "new thinking"--that is, the rejection of basic pillars of official communist ideology. One was the dictum of German military thinker Carl von Clausewitz about war (and preparation for it) as the continuation of policy by other means. Another was the thesis that "class struggle" (that is, Soviet security interests seen in conflict with the interests of the capitalist world) was above the "common human interests." Both the agreement on the INF with the United States and the new military doctrine required radical ideological change.

As early as 1986, Gorbachev began to advance cautiously the notion of "new thinking" and deny the legitimacy of use of military force in the nuclear age. But the majority of the military and bureaucracy was still imbued with Cold War thinking. A veteran head of the Central Committee's international department, Boris Ponomarev, fulminated privately: "What is this 'new thinking'? Let the Americans change

privacy. What is this new thinking? Let the Americans change their thinking.... What are you trying to do to our foreign policy? Are you against [military] strength, which is the only language that imperialism understands?"¹⁷

During 1986, Gorbachev cautiously began to overcome the opposition among the Soviet military to the disarmament ideas that went beyond the principle of strict parity. Deputy Foreign Minister Georgy Kornienko, a most principled adherent to this mentality, was gradually eased out of the loop by Gorbachev and Shevardnadze. Finally, he had to leave the foreign ministry for a peripheral position at the international department of the Central Committee. Marshal Akhromeyev and other military leaders attempted to resist on-site inspections and the proposal to eliminate SS-20s, but, under the pressure from the political leadership (who used both military and party discipline to remonstrate the military), this resistance quickly collapsed. After Reykjavik, Akhromeyev, increasingly upset with the turn of events, tried to resign; Gorbachev appealed to his patriotic feelings and sense of duty and offered him the job of personal arms control adviser. Subsequently, Akhromeyev played a crucial role in convincing the suspicious military establishment to support new disarmament initiatives.

His first assignment was to introduce to the military a new doctrine that would justify deep unilateral cuts in Soviet conventional and nuclear forces stationed in Europe. Soon after the summit, Akhromeyev presented a draft to the Academy of the General Staff, where it produced a state of profound shock and muffled "cries of treason." The defense council approved the new doctrine.

At the same time, as part of the campaign to expand support of Soviet disarmament policy among Western scientific community and antinuclear liberals, Gorbachev argued for reopening and reassessing state policies on political prisoners and "human rights" in general. Reopening the issue of imprisoned "dissidents" had larger, perhaps crucial, implications for domestic reforms. After Reykjavik, the KGB, following Gorbachev's instructions, allowed Andrei Sakharov, a well-known opponent of the SDI, to return from exile in the city of Gor'ky (Nizhny Novgorod).

As Gorbachev's foreign policy assistant commented, since the end of 1986 "the process of disarmament" that was initially meant to "provide external conditions" for *perestroika* began to turn into its driving engine, at least in the ideological spheres. By all indications, Gorbachev was fully aware of this interconnection: the progress of *glasnost* went in lockstep with his initiatives on disarmament. Instead of waiting, Gorbachev decided to accept the American "double zero" proposal of 1982, which would have implied asymmetrically large cuts of Soviet medium-range missiles.

GORBACHEV DEFINES as "one of the turning points" his April 1987 talks in Moscow with US Secretary of State George Schultz. The talks revealed two very different philosophical and practical positions. Gorbachev already operated from the high idealistic precepts of new thinking and castigated the principle of "nuclear parity." Schultz based his tactics on the orthodox vision of nuclear balance, interpreting it, of course, from a US angle. Political realities played a role as well: Schultz, a cautious advocate of arms reductions, had to look over his shoulder at his many enemies and critics at home. When Gorbachev called the nuclear parity "a casuistry," Schultz objected:

Schultz: It should be preserved, for I, perhaps with the help of Ambassador [Paul] Nitze would have to defend the forthcoming agreement before the Senate during its ratification."

Gorbachev: Perhaps we should send our people to help you?

Schultz: Only if they will say that the agreement is not advantageous to the USSR. [Laughter.] Perhaps this will help.¹⁸

SOI?

Gorbachev knew all too well that he, unlike Reagan or Schultz, did not face at that time any domestic opposition to disarmament. Because of his immense power he could safely take a disarmament initiative, totally ignoring or circumventing the opinion of crucial bureaucratic constituencies, particularly the military. In a demonstration of this arbitrary power, during the meeting with Secretary of State George Shultz, Gorbachev and Shevardnadze agreed to liquidate not only all SS-20s stationed in Europe and Asia, but also the newly deployed tactical SS-23s (known as Oka). Formally, this missile tested at 450 kilometers range, and was out of the confines of the INF discussion. The Americans pocketed this concession without blinking. (George Shultz does not even mention the episode in his memoirs.) But the top military brass, always the stalwarts of nuclear parity, were shocked. They claimed that Shevardnadze intentionally deceived Gorbachev by telling him that the military would not object to the elimination of Oka.

For the first time, a rift opened up between the foreign minister and the military establishment. The old core of the military protested against "inappropriate concessions" to the Americans. But Gorbachev combined stick and carrot to get rid of this obstacle. On one hand, he let Akhromeyev work with the military with facts and figures in-hand, trying to persuade them. On the other, he moved to purge the military establishment. Valentin Varennikov, initially the most resolute critic of

Shevardnadze's "concessions," was sent to head Soviet forces in Afghanistan. Then an ideal pretext came on May 28, 1987, when German amateur pilot Mathias Rust flew his single-engine Sessna from Finland to Moscow, made several circles over the Kremlin in the immediate vicinity to Gorbachev's office, and then landed on the Red Square. Shevardnadze and the KGB's Chebrykov suggested that Rust should not be arrested for his crime and the whole incident should be portrayed as "a peace mission."

Gorbachev, however, preferred to give the military establishment a humiliating whipping at the Politburo. Like the leaders of the Soviet nuclear complex after Chernobyl, the top Soviet military were blamed for laxness, grave shortcomings, and professional inadequacy. Minister of Defense Sergei Sokolov resigned on the spot, and more than 150 Soviet officers were tried in court and removed from their posts. In this political execution Gorbachev was assisted by Akhromeyev and Shevardnadze, with eager approval of most Politburo members, including Ligachev, Gromyko, and Ryzhkov. Ligachev threw in the face of the military that "the Army undercut its authority." Gorbachev picked a new defense minister, Dmitry Yazov, who was a congenial general with no expertise or will to take a stand on arms control. The quiet purge of the military ranks continued after that, and by the end of 1988 the entire top echelon of the ministry, the General Staff, the Warsaw Pact commander, and all the military district commanders had been changed. As one American expert commented, "even during Stalin's bloody purge of the Red Army in 1937-38, the percentage of change in top level posts was not as high."¹⁹ The Soviet military establishment was politically and morally crushed.

In arms control discussions the struggle "for Gorbachev's soul" between reformist advisers and spokesmen for the military-industrial complex continued and remained intense. But Gorbachev's sympathies were strongly in favor of asymmetrical disarmament and radical revisionism of the arms control nuclear orthodoxy. By May 1987 the General Secretary admitted Soviet conventional superiority in Europe (27,000 tanks and almost 3.5 million soldiers) and began to hint vaguely at a possibility of unilateral reductions of Soviet troops in Central Europe. But, as before, Gorbachev was less interested in specific disarmament talks than in presenting the world with philosophical and moral guidelines of new thinking.

After the intensive work on the Black Sea in the summer of 1987, Gorbachev published *Perestroika and New Thinking: For the Soviet Union and the Entire World*, a catechism in which he openly contrasted "all human interests" with "class interests" and proclaimed that "it is no longer proper to define the peaceful coexistence of states with different social orders as a specific form of class struggle." Gorbachev concluded that preparations for nuclear war made no

yes

political sense and that security in the nuclear age was "indivisible," that it transcended ideological, social, and geopolitical differences. But he went much further by concluding that "generally the policy of force is doomed" and a most effective world politics should be "moral."

Not uncommon for a reformer who searched for a new ideological message, Gorbachev went much too far. While abandoning nuclear orthodoxy in the name of the philosophy of global interdependence, he prematurely and imprudently rejected traditional "realism" and the concept of national interest as well (the basis of security policies of all great powers, including the United States). Under the existing world conditions, particularly given the conservative instincts of another superpower, the United States, "new thinking" was nothing but a messianic utopia.

By the end of 1987, however, this seemed to be the only approach that could break through the deadlock of Cold War mistrust. Privately, Gorbachev touted the merits of romanticism and idealism as the only way to break with the past and turn a new page in history.

Looking Back

The more time separates us from the period of 1985-88, the more extraordinary Gorbachev's "nuclear learning" appears. In fact, it appears all the more remarkable and fascinating in the light of what has happened since 1988.

The available evidence, from archives and oral histories, reveals two phases in Gorbachev's approach to disarmament. At the first, early stage, he and his entourage viewed it as a means to get out of the impasse in the relationship with the West, particularly with the United States, which in itself they saw as a precondition for domestic reforms. At the second stage, after Chernobyl, Gorbachev and his reform-minded assistants began to view disarmament as an inextricable part in the process of reforming not only the Soviet Union but the entire global order. Throughout, we see Gorbachev's surprising and consistent nuclear abolitionism. In both phases, Gorbachev's emphasis on nuclear disarmament was enduring and went far beyond the usual concerns of "normal" statesmanship.

Some personal features of Gorbachev must explain this phenomenon. His lack of experience with, and minimal personal investment in, the nuclear arms race made him an ideal partner of Ronald Reagan, who shared the same characteristics. Moreover, both Gorbachev and Reagan became leaders at a moment when bipolarity and Cold War rivalry created a wide-spread sense of a global deadlock, and when the stockpiles of nuclear weapons in both superpowers were growing exponentially. From this angle, both antinuclear movements in the West and the personal antinuclear stances of leaders look like part of the same historic phenomenon.

1995), vol. 2.

2 Interview of Mikhail Gorbachev by Yuri Smirnov, August 23, 1994. Cited in V. B. Adamsky and Yuri N. Smirnov, *Science and Society: History of the Soviet Atomic Project, 1940s-1950s* (Moscow: Kurchatov Institute Publishing Center, 1997), p. 333.

3 Anatoly Chernyaev, "Fenomen Gorbacheva v kontekste liderstva" [Phenomenon of Gorbachev as Leader], *Mezhdunarodnaia Zhizn* 7 (1993): p. 57.

4 Mikhail S. Gorbachev, *Gody trudnykh reshenii* (Moscow: Alfa-print, 1993), p. 47

5 Gorbachev, *Zhizn i reformy*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Novosti, 1995), p. 15.

6 In private and to the Politburo he called Reagan "a troglodyte," "caveman," the person steeped in most primitive anti-communism. *Zhizn i reformy*, vol. 2, p. 15.

7 Anatoly Chernyaev's notes from the Politburo, March 24, 1986, The Archive of the Gorbachev Foundation, Moscow, Opis 2, File 1.

✓ 8 Anatoly Chernyaev, *Shest let s Gorbachevym* [Six years with Gorbachev] (Moscow: Progress-Kultura, 1993), p. 104.

9 Remark at the International Oral History Conference, "The Crash of the Bipolar World: Soviet Factor, 1988-91," Moscow, June 21-22, 1999. Transcript prepared by Oleg Skvortsov and Ilya Gaiduk (courtesy of Oleg Skvortsov), p. 67.

10 Politburo Sessions October 4 and 8, 1986, notes of Anatoly Chernyaev, the Archive of Gorbachev Foundation, Fund 2, Opis 1.

11 Gorbachev-Reagan Talks at Reykjavik, a morning talk on October 11, 1986, *Mirovaia ekonomika i mezhdunarodniie otnosheniia*, no. 4, 1993, p. 81-83.

12 Anatoly Chernyaev's notes of Gorbachev's thinking about Reykjavik (including on the plane on his way back), October 12, 1986, Archive of the Gorbachev Foundation, Moscow.

13 Zapis besedi M. S. Gorbacheva s prezidentom F. Mitteranom [Record of conversation of Gorbachev with Mitterand], July 7, 1986. Archive of the Gorbachev Foundation, Moscow.

14 Zapis besedi M. S. Gorbacheva s bivshim prezidentom Ssha R. Niksonom, July 17, 1986. Archive of the Gorbachev Foundation, Moscow.

15 Chernyaev, *Shest let s Gorbachevym*, pp. 137-38

15 Chernyaev, *Shest let s Gorbachevym*, pp. 137-38.

16 Record of the session of the CC CPSU Politburo, October 14, 1986, the Volkogonov Papers in the Library of Congress, Manuscript Division.

17 Chernyaev, *Shest let s Gorbachevym*, p. 152. See also William E. Odom, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 96-97.

18 Gorbachev, *Zhizn i reformy*, vol. 2, pp. 35-47.

19 Odom, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military*, p. 110.

As Jonathan Schell emphasizes in his contribution to this forum, the anti- nuclear momentum has rapidly waned with the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Today, nuclear proliferation, not disarmament, is the dominant trend, and in Russia a new political and bureaucratic consensus is emerging that resembles Thatcher's nuclear "philosophy" rather than Gorbachev's revolutionary approach. ^{per?} The new Russian nuclear doctrine, with its emphasis on the first use of nuclear weapons in response to even to a conventional attack, is a telling symbol of new times. Meanwhile, Gorbachev and his loyal advisers say that they had been ahead of their time, and that even the democratic West was "not ready" for new thinking.

Yet there is a third, and most likely, explanation for Gorbachev's urge to disarm: it was an essential part of his messianic utopianism, which, in turn, was the vital ideological and psychological foundation of his reformist drive. It is clear, in retrospect, that this ideological euphoria in Moscow made it possible to wind down the Cold War atmosphere of mistrust and to transform the process of arms control into disarmament. The evidence suggests that the ideological factor was not the only one that made the Soviets disarm. There were serious budgetary pressures by the end of 1988, the result of both structural crisis of the Stalinist economic model, and the gross errors of Gorbachev's administration in trying to mend it. Still, the reformist agenda and the pressing need for "ideological revolution" it created were by far much more decisive factors. The dynamics of the overall reformist agenda and particularly the idealistic new thinking contributed to Gorbachev's conversion into a nuclear abolitionist. [?]

Gorbachev displayed a good deal of political inconsistency and zigzags, but on one point of his new thinking he absolutely stuck to his guns: nuclear disarmament, asymmetrical reductions of Soviet armed force, and the general renunciation of use of force both outside and inside the Soviet Union. To no small degree, this principled attitude led to a rapid reduction of the nuclear threat and an unprecedented decrease in the nuclear arsenals of the two major nuclear powers. At the same time it accounted for a rapid and peaceful disappearance of the Soviet Union from the political map.

✓ Vladislav Zubok, senior fellow at the National Security Archive at George Washington University, is writing a book about Mikhail Gorbachev and the end of the Cold War. Click for other essays on "The New Nuclear Danger" by Lawrence Wittner, Jonathan Schell, and others.

1 Dmitry Volkogonov, Sem vozhdai: galereia liderov SSSR [Seven Rulers: A Gallery of the Leaders of the USSR] (Moscow: Novosti,